

Does Music Participation Impact Mental Health and Academic Performance in High School Students?

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Abstract

In an increasingly competitive student culture, high school students often feel compelled to drop music programs—such as band, orchestra, and choir—assuming that it will help them focus on coursework and maintain both academic competitiveness and mental well-being. This study examines whether such assumptions are valid by evaluating the relationship between music participation, academic performance, and mental well-being. A survey of 646 students at Arcadia High School in Southern California was conducted between May 10 and June 3, 2024. Students completed three validated mental health instruments: Perceived Stress Questionnaire (PSQ), General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7), and Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), assessing stress, anxiety, and depression levels. Data were also collected on each student's Grade-Point-Average (GPA), number of Advanced Placement (AP)/honors courses, and demographics. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to evaluate associations between music participation (current, past, none) and mental health or academic metrics. Of the participants, 28% were currently involved in music programs, 17% participated in the past, and 55% never participated. Students currently involved in music programs reported significantly lower depression scores ($p=0.047$) and had nominally lower stress and anxiety scores although statistically insignificant. Academically, current music students had higher GPAs ($p<0.01$) and took more AP/honors courses than peers not involved in music. No evidence from our study suggested that involvement in music programs hinders academic or emotional success; rather, it is associated with improved academic outcomes and reduced depression. The belief that students must sacrifice music to excel is not supported by this study's findings.

Keywords: anxiety; course rigor; depression; secondary education; stress